Micah Mocnik

Dr. Gompf

English 102

1 May, 2025

Beyond Right and Wrong: Moral Complexity in Kate Chopin's *The Storm*

Kate Chopin's short story, *The Storm,* may only take a few minutes to read, but the questions it raises about morality, personal desire, and societal expectations stick with you much longer, and leave you reflecting on your own moral code. At its core, this is not just a story about adultery—it's a quiet rebellion against the black-and-white moral code that governed (and still often governs) people's lives.

In addition to that, *The Storm* was my favorite reading we did in this class, as it makes the reader reflect on their own moral code and decide for themselves what *truly happened* in the story–was it *right,* was it *wrong?* What is right? What is wrong? Perhaps studying moral philosophy can answer that question for us. Rather than punish its characters for stepping outside those bounds, Chopin paints their choices with nuance, even tenderness. Through tone, symbolism, and outcome, she suggests that morality is not always about clear-cut rules—it's shaped by individual context and emotional truth. When read through the philosophical lenses of moral relativism and existentialism, *The Storm* becomes less about sin and more about freedom—the freedom to feel, to choose, and to define what happiness looks like for yourself.

In the late 19th century, women's roles were rigid, and sexual transgression—especially by the wife—were seen as morally inexcusable. While we could dive into the societal limitations cripplingly placed on women around the world, it's probably best that we continue on with the story. The literature of the time reinforced this idea of sexual transgressions being morally worse if committed by a woman. Stories of "fallen women" almost always ended in despair or death, as in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The*

Scarlet Letter. Chopin, however, takes a different route. She introduces Calixta, a married woman who reunites with her former lover, Alcée, during a literal and emotional storm. The setup screams scandal, and readers expect her to be punished. But that doesn't happen. Instead, she's portrayed with empathy. Her actions aren't vilified; they're understood. In doing so, Chopin aligns herself with moral relativists—those who argue that right and wrong aren't universal but depend on culture, circumstance, and individual need (Westacott).

That idea comes through most clearly in the story's tone. If Chopin wanted readers to condemn Calixta, she could've used dramatic, sorrowful, or even angry language. Instead, she writes in a calm, almost gentle voice. The narration is matter-of-fact, not emotional. The affair itself is described not as seedy or destructive, but natural—like it was meant to happen. Even the language around physical desire feels soft and beautiful, not shameful. That tone guides readers to see what happens not as dirty or disastrous, but emotionally honest. Calixta and Alcée don't wreck their lives; they find a moment of truth in a world that expects them to stay repressed. It's not a mistake. It's just… *life*.

Chopin also leans heavily on symbolism to back up this message. The storm itself is a clear metaphor for the affair—it builds, it bursts, and then it passes. But there's a deeper message in the way the storm resolves. After the rain ends, the sun returns. Calixta welcomes her husband and son home with joy. Alcée writes to his wife, suggesting she and the kids stay away longer—and she's happy to do so. Everyone is content. The storm brought no damage. That's not how stories about cheating are supposed to end, especially not in that era. Chopin uses the storm to say, subtly but powerfully, that passion doesn't have to ruin anything. Sometimes, it just clears the air.

Existentialist philosophers belive that people create their own meaning—they don't just accept what society hands them. That's exactly what Chopin's characters do. They make choices based on their feelings, not based on what they're "supposed" to do. And they're okay afterward. There's no divine punishment, no dramatic fallout, no reassertion of moral norms, no no. Instead, everyone returns to their

lives with a quiet sort of peace. The Storm suggests that sometimes, doing what feels right in the moment—even if it breaks the rules—is the most honest thing a person can do (Flynn).

This doesn't mean Chopin is encouraging adultery—and she's certainly not pushing readers to go out and cheat on their spouses. What she is doing is asking us to look at morality in a more complex way. She wants the reader to see beyond the black and white—to see, to feel, to know, to live, to breathe, to think, to dream, and to imagine, even if just for a moment, how freeing it must have felt for the desire that had always been present to rise, release, and disappear. Maybe what society says is "wrong" isn't always that simple. Maybe, in certain circumstances, what looks like a moral failure is actually an emotional necessity. That's the big idea behind moral relativism—and Chopin's story is steeped in it.

In the end, *The Storm* leaves readers unsettled—and that's the point. We expect regret or shame to consume her, but instead, we get peace and clarity. That tension forces us to think: how many of our moral beliefs are really our own, and how many have we just absorbed from the world around us? Chopin doesn't give us an easy answer, but she does leave us with a challenge. Don't judge so quickly. Look closer. Understand the people behind the choices. Because life, like weather, doesn't follow neat rules—and neither does morality.

My hope is that as future generations read this ever-so-short yet impactful short story, they'll see—just as I did—that society's moral code isn't always absolute. What might not be considered "okay" in your small Southern West Virginia community doesn't necessarily mean it's wrong. Morality is relative. Time is relative. We only have so long on this planet to live freely and to be happy. Shouldn't we all work to accomplish that goal—and to live our own moral truth?

Works Cited

Chopin, Kate. The Storm. 1898. The Kate Chopin International Society, www.katechopin.org/the-storm/.

Flynn, Thomas R. "Existentialism." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, edited by Edward N. Zalta, Fall 2020, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/.

Westacott, Emrys. “Moral Relativism.” ThoughtCo., 6 Jan. 2020, https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-moral-relativism-4009951.